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Distichia and Ectopic Cilia

What are Distichia and Ectopic Cilia?

Distichia and Ectopic Cilia are abnormal eyelashes. Distichia are a specific type of abnormal eyelash that grow through the glandular openings on the eyelid margins. Ectopic cilia are more severely aberrant, and they grow through the conjunctival surface inside the eyelid, perpendicular to the eyelid margin.

What causes Distichia and Ectopic Cilia?

There is no known cause for the development of distichia or ectopic cilia. Several breeds are over-represented, indicating that there may be one or more heritable factors that lead to the development of these abnormal eyelashes.

What are the common clinical signs?

In many cases, distichia are incidental findings on thorough ophthalmic examination. However, some patients experience increased ocular irritation associated with distichia, resulting in chronic tearing, squinting, and possibly corneal injuries and ulcerations.

When ectopic cilia erupt through the conjunctival surface of the eyelid, they often cause an acute onset of discomfort, squinting, and pawing at the eye. Most patients develop superficial corneal ulcers that may be linear and recurrent in nature. The ectopic hairs are often found in clusters, but they can be difficult to locate in the folds of conjunctiva.

What is the treatment?

Distichia that are incidentally noted do not always require treatment. Alternatively, distichia that are causing ocular irritation should be removed. Although lashes can be plucked, this is generally not recommended, as the hairs reliably regrow. Multiple techniques have been described, but cryoepilation and electroepilation are two of the most commonly utilized techniques.

Ectopic cilia should be surgically removed, often with ancillary cryotherapy to ensure that there is minimal chance of lash recurrence.

Cryotherapy causes marked swelling and temporary eyelid depigmentation. Patients require 2-3 weeks until swelling resolves, and up to 6-8 weeks for the lid margins to re-pigment. Some patients require additional cryotherapy surgery if lashes regrow or if new lashes erupt.